

## GRATEFUL FOR THE UNEXPECTED

Sermon by Audette Fulbright  
Sunday, November 10, 2019  
All Souls Church, New York City

### **Reading:**

There is a moment before dawn  
when the night is firmly in charge of the sky.  
There is no arguing with the opacity that holds  
both a fertile imagination and cover of destruction.

Just hold on.

There is the moment when the dream we share  
is newly born, wet and wriggling in our hands.  
Sometimes it is true that salvific futures look  
vulnerable and small before us. We remain unsure.

Just hold on.

Anything good was small at first.  
You know that Dr. King said, "I have a dream."  
It definitely was not the I have a reality speech.  
It was real, in a different way, that could be felt,  
that could be shared.

They held on.

That dreaming speech happened in August 1963.  
And you know what came before was April;  
a letter from a Birmingham jail. One moment did  
inform the other, but the future being built  
could not be known with certitude.

They held on.

We gather, Unitarian Universalists, certain only of  
our power to be human. Finding ourselves committed  
to keeping our work and being our covenant.  
And when we fail to keep our promises  
we don't throw them away, labelled as impossible.  
We take up our courage. We begin again.

We hold on.

Sprinkled in the wind, we can hear the question:  
if we are not white supremacy-shaped  
into religious robes and rituals

then who are we?

We are present, both in attention and in answer  
we are here.

We hold on.

We contain multitudes, not just of questions,  
and contradictions, but also of possibilities.

We continue to labor for the creation of community  
in which all of us, not just each, but every part of us,  
is welcome in our home of faith.

We hold on.

### **Sermon:**

Many years ago, in my first ministry settlement, at a meeting of the Virginia UU Ministers' cluster, I was sitting at lunch next to our most senior member, the Rev. Dr. Gordon McKeeman. His ministry in Universalism began in 1945, and I relished the chance to hear his thoughts on most anything. There was discussion, somewhere around the table, of someone making a hard choice with their parents or a parishioner about a loved one entering an "assisted living" facility. In a dry, sotto voce aside to me, Gordon said, "We're *all* in assisted living."

From that day to this, I have been captured by the truth of this simple statement: we're all in assisted living. There is not one of us in this room who is here purely of their own volition and agency; from parents lending DNA and the necessary birthing time, to our reliance on others' efforts for our shelter, food, clothes, & livelihoods, to our kinship and friendship networks – those who have nursed us through illness, those whose voices help us rise up in the morning... we *all* survive through the assistance of others. Think for just a moment, of all the people, known and unknown, who have contributed to your life, your growth, your happiness, your education, your wellbeing. Now try to imagine life without anyone, ever. We all need assistance, living.

If we all are in need of one another, how shall we live, then? Let me share this story from animal rights activist Dan Mathews' brilliant autobiography, called *Committed*:

"One afternoon during third grade I was walking home from school and spotted some menacing fifth-graders throwing rocks into a bush. I slowed down out of curiosity, though I tried to appear nonchalant, as these were boys who would certainly slug you in the stomach unprovoked. As I strolled by, a miserable screech echoed from the shrub. The boys chuckled. I knelt down to see a terrified, pregnant gray tabby. The cat was trying to hide and became entangled, looking defenseless and defeated. Our eyes locked, and she seemed to wonder if I, too, was an attacker.

"Would these older boys beat me up if I intervened? Unsure of myself, I forced a smile, making them think I might join in the fun while pondering my options. Should I find my brothers or call Mom at work? Should I flag down a cop or knock on the nearest door? The boys had run out of rocks and were chucking sticks and dirt clods at their target, trying to drive her from the bush. What would they do then? I knelt down again, and she looked up at me, full of anguish.

“Suddenly oblivious to the junior sadists, I dove under the bush and reached through the low, dry branches to unsnarl the fat cat without squishing her stomach. It wasn’t easy, but I managed to pull her free and scoop her up. Without looking back, I dashed across the street and ran home with the squirming bundle...” (p. 16)

Mathews has become one of the most successful and interesting figures in animal-rights history, a driving figure within the movement PETA, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. I share this story not because it’s one of the most interesting in Dan’s life-arc, but because it is one of those profound human moments: will we assist, or will we walk away? What will we risk, what will we give, what kind of world are we willing to allow by not acting?

This is a rather heavy way of framing the question. On the one hand, it’s worth remembering, always remembering, that we make a difference, everything we do makes a difference. The Buddha said, “Whatsoever a person commits, whether it be virtuous or sinful deeds, none of these is of little import; all bear some kind of fruit.” This is true. We may think some moment insignificant, some choice unimportant, but we make our small or large contributions to the whole story of life in each moment. It does matter, what we choose. In Dan’s story, choosing to risk being beaten up by these bullies, choosing to save this one terrified pregnant cat, mattered: in that moment, a 7 year old child made the world a more trustworthy, life-affirming place. He assisted life, and in doing so, he set himself on a path which would change the world.

Before I move on from Dan Mathew’s contribution to this sermon, let me share with you something else he said, which I think is important to remember, especially for those of us who are parents, grandparents, aunts or uncles, mentors or just generally concerned with how children grow into better people. He said, “Most parents shield their children from the world’s unrest, which, I believe, has caused an epidemic of apathy; by the time kids are deemed old enough to “understand,” they’ve grown comfortably accustomed to not caring.” (*Ibid*, p. 15) I agree that it is not only possible, but essential, to help our children understand the world’s needs, and their own power to make a difference.

The needs of the world. One of the hardest things in this life is finding the strength to deal with so many needs, pressing in on all sides. We need spiritual resilience; we need the courage of our convictions. It is one of the great challenges of our time, that just when we most need the nurturance of spiritual community and the guidance of a steady moral compass, fewer people than ever are regularly participating in religious life — and fewer still take seriously the value of a commitment to spiritual practice.

But for those who take it seriously, there is a spiritual discipline that echoes in all the great traditions, including our own - gratitude. In Judaism:

“The Hebrew term for gratitude is *hakarat hatov*, which means, literally, “recognizing the good.”” Alan Morinis, of the Mussar Institute, says, “Practicing gratitude means recognizing the good that is already yours. ... There is a story—maybe an urban legend, but full of truth nonetheless—concerning the famous violinist Itzhak Perlman. One evening, Perlman was in New York to give a concert. As a child, he had been stricken with polio and so getting on stage is no small feat for him. He wears braces on both legs and walks with two crutches. Perlman crosses the stage painfully slowly, until he reaches the chair in which he seats himself to play. As soon as he appeared on stage that night, the audience applauded and then waited respectfully as he made his way slowly across the stage to his chair. He took his seat, signaled to the conductor to begin, and began to play. No sooner had he finished the first few bars than one of the strings on his violin snapped with a report like gunshot. At that point, Perlman was close enough to the

beginning of the piece that it would have been reasonable to have brought the concert to a halt while he replaced the string, to begin again. But that's not what he did. He waited a moment and then signaled the conductor to pick up just where they had left off. Perlman now had only three strings with which to play his soloist part. He was able to find some of the missing notes on adjoining strings, but where that wasn't possible, he had to rearrange the music on the spot in his head so that it all still held together. He played with passion and artistry, spontaneously rearranging the symphony right through to the end. When he finally rested his bow, the audience sat for a moment in stunned silence. And then they rose to their feet and cheered wildly. They knew they had been witness to an extraordinary display of human skill and ingenuity.

Perlman raised his bow to signal for quiet. "You know," he said, "sometimes it is the artist's task to find out how much beautiful music you can still make with what you have left." (Alan Morinis, Mussar Institute - [https://jewishcamp.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2017/04/Gratitude\\_-\\_Mussar\\_Institute.pdf](https://jewishcamp.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2017/04/Gratitude_-_Mussar_Institute.pdf))

In Islam, the call to thankfulness or gratitude is expected to be expressed in three different ways. The first is the individual, personal awareness of all one's blessings — all one has to be grateful for. This awareness should be a part of daily living. The second form of thankfulness is to express gratitude with the tongue — to say thank you to Allah and to those who bless your life, who make your life possible. The third form of gratitude is to serve and share, giving back to your family and community in thanks for what you receive from them.

In the Spring edition of the 2007 *UU World* magazine, Galen wrote, in his article "The heart of our faith: Gratitude should be the center of Unitarian Universalist theology":

In my view, religion is constituted by two distinct but related impulses: a sense of awe and a sense of obligation. The feeling of awe emerges from our experience of the grandeur of life and the mystery of the divine. This feeling becomes religious when a sense of obligation lays claim to us, and we feel a duty to the larger life that we share. In theological terms, religion begins as transcendence, which is the part about God, and then leads to discipleship, which is the part about the discipline of faith. I realize the idea of faith as a discipline may...sound like heresy to many Unitarian Universalists. Unless our faith is mere intellectual affectation, however, the defining element of our faith must be a daily practice of some kind. What kind of practice? ...I believe that Unitarian Universalism should be defined by gratitude....The discipline of gratitude reminds us how utterly dependent we are on the people and world around us for everything that matters. From this flows an ethic of gratitude that obligates us to create a future that justifies an increasing sense of gratitude from the human family as a whole. The ethic of gratitude demands that we nurture the world that nurtures us in return." (<https://www.uuworld.org/articles/a-theology-gratitude>)

Gratitude as a *discipline* — a way of paying attention to our lives and our experience, a practice of giving thanks, even in the most difficult of circumstances - leads us to the other salvific reality: that we are all in assisted living. None of us can make this journey alone. Every single thing — from the oxygen that we breathe, to the DNA that is our structural code, to the food that we eat or the love that we give & receive... everything that makes up our lives comes from a delicate and generous interplay of living systems.

If you are hungry for a more steady emotional rhythm in a world that seems hectic or overwrought, taking seriously a discipline of gratitude and an awareness of our profound interdependence is profoundly worthwhile practice. You may find a path in Buddhism, in Islam,

in Judaism, in Unitarian Universalism, as we've noted. It is there in Christianity, too - for example, consider 1st Chronicles: *Give thanks to the Lord, for [God] is good; his love endures forever.*"

Another path to an open, steady heart is in recognizing, every day, our profound interdependence on one another. None of us is an island, entire of ourselves; all of us are in assisted living. Now and forevermore, we are. A life lived in appreciation of what we are given opens the heart, creates more love, gives us more confidence, frees our energy to be more engaged and giving. It is an act of humility, an act of grace, to discover in each moment all the hundreds of people who have contributed to one's life; all of the earth's bounty which is spread before us; all those who have loved and bled and suffered to create the world, and who still do, every moment. It is also a blessing to honor ourselves for all the things we, also, do to weave the world. All the tender touches, the nights awake with a sick child, the hours laboring over a problem, the time spent with our friends, the ideas and dreams we have shared with others, the trees we have planted and the animals we have loved... every moment, a choice: every action, meaning-filled.

Let me close this morning with this prayer by the great theologian Howard Thurman:

"I remember with gratitude the fruits of the labors of others, which I have shared as a part of the normal experience of daily living.

I remember the beautiful things that I have seen, heard, and felt – some as a result of definite seeking on my part, and many that came unheralded into my path, warming my heart and rejoicing my spirit.

I remember the moments of distress that proved to be groundless and those that taught me profoundly about the evilness of evil and the goodness of good. I remember the new people I have met, from whom I have caught glimpses of the meaning of my own life and the true character of human dignity.

I remember the awareness of the spirit of God that sought me out in my aloneness and gave to me a sense of assurance that undercut my despair and confirmed my life with new courage and abiding hope."

May we all be more grateful to this life which loves the living; and may we abide in awareness of all that we have received.

Amen, ashe, blessed be.